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REPORTING ROMANIA'S 2009 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS. PRESS COVERAGE AND VIABILITY OF THE MALE AND FEMALE CANDIDATES

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Abstract. *This article aims to analyze and compare the press coverage of the two most visible male and female candidates for a Member of the European Parliament office during the campaign for the European elections held in Romania, June 2009. The present study examines a month of coverage in the four most influential broadsheets and tabloids in Romania: Cancan, EvenimentulZilei, Gândul and Libertatea. Using a design of content analysis, the results of this paper emphasize that Elena Băsescu received less coverage than did George Becali. There were also found qualitative differences in coverage, attributed to Elena Băsescu's gender, who was depicted as not being viable to represent the Romanians interests in Brussels.*

Keywords: *member of the European Parliament, gender, election coverage, horse-race*

1. Introduction

The media coverage from a gender perspective has extensively been investigated during the last decades, being the subject of a significant number of research studies (Bartels, 1993; Bystrom, Robertson & Banwart, 2001; Gidengil & Everitt, 2003, Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991; Niven & Zilber, 2001). In recent years, scholars from political science, journalism and communication have examined the media coverage of the male and female candidates running for office, politicians and first ladies. For the most part, they found that women and men in politics are treated differently by the media, suggesting that gender stereotypes continue to pose problems for female politicians. As the literature

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review will show, this mostly involves the quantity of coverage and the viability assessments. Usually women candidates receive less and more negative coverage than their male opponents, being depicted as not being suitable for a political office (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Jamieson, 1992; Kahn, 1991, 1992, 1994a, 1994b; Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991; Kerbel, 1997; Patterson, 1994; Valenzuela & Correa, 2009).

In this article, the Romanian candidates for a MEP seat are discussed as the main political actors. While the literature on European Union (McCormick, 2005; Richardson, 2001) in general and European elections (De Vreese, 2003; De Vreese, Banducci, Semetko&Boomgaarden, 2007; Jochen, Lauf&Semetko, 2004) in particular has grown tremendously over the last decade, the topic of unequal media coverage for the male and female candidates remains rather unexplored. More than that, the most part of the gender media studies was developed in North American and Western European countries. The research on this issue conducted in Eastern Europe is rather insignificant.

Although the studies have been conducted so far introduced in the scientific field a great amount of data and information related to the European Parliament (Hix, 2005; Katz &Wessels; Magnette 2005; McCormick, 2005), until now the press coverage of the male and female Romanian candidates for a MEP seat has not been studied. So, the present paper aims to reduce this informational gap.

The theme of this article has both a theoretical and an applied dimension. The paper is divided as follows: I first briefly review the theoretical framework by introducing a general overview of the literature in the field, stressing my own scientific contribution. Then I describe the research method, the data used and, in the end, I analyze the findings, highlighting the main conclusions of the article.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The MEPs and the European elections in Romania - scientific context

Having in mind the theme of this article, it requires an overview of the scientific literature in the field. Even though an important issue, there are very few studies on the Romanian elections for the European Parliament. The current situation can be explained, all well, by the novelty of this electoral competition in the new member states.

One of the studies conducted in this respect is Mircea Comșa, Andrei Gheorghiuță and Claudiu D. Tuفی's work (2010), comprising a collection of seven articles, focused on the different aspects of this new type of elections held in Romania. Another analysis on the electoral campaign for the European

Parliament, conducted during 25th of May - 5th of June 2009, was developed by the Media Monitoring Agency. This last research highlights that the European issues were underrepresented in the Romanian press. More than that, the media agenda was dominated by subjects as allegations of electoral fraud, the internal struggle for power and the presidential elections.

The study conducted by the Media Monitoring Agency also reveals that the most visible female candidate in the Romanian press was Elena Băsescu (30%, N=50), while the most visible male political figure was George Becali (19%, N=15)¹.

Nevertheless, the study of the European elections media coverage from a gender perspective has been largely neglected so far. Among the articles dedicated to the Romanian European elections lacks a rigorous and coherent press analysis on the male and female candidates for a MEP office. The present article aims to reduce this informational gap, by analyzing the press coverage of the two most visible male and female candidates for a MEP seat in Brussels, as identified by the Media Monitoring Agency: Elena Băsescu and George Becali.

Before moving ahead to the literature review, I will first make a short description of the candidates analyzed in this paper. So, Elena Băsescu is the youngest daughter of the President of Romania. She became visible on the political stage in 2008, when she was elected as the general secretary of the Youth Organization of the Liberal Democratic Party. Even if she graduated her studies in the field of banking, for a significant period of time Elena Băsescu worked as a model, being notorious in media for her romantic relationships and frequent grammatical errors. In March 2009, she resigned from the Democratic Liberal Party and ran as independent, being elected as a MEP. George Becali, also known as Gigi Becali, is a Romanian businessman and politician, owner of Steaua Bucharest football club. From humble beginnings as a shepherd, after the fall of communism he made his fortune in real estate, becoming one of the Romanian richest men. In 2004 Becali created his own party, The New Generation Party. Four years later he tried to become a deputy, but his New Generation Party failed to pass the threshold. In June 2009, he was elected as a Member of the European Parliament on the list of Romania Big Party.

¹<http://www.google.ro/#hl=ro&source=hp&q=%E2%80%99ETemele+europene+%C5%9Fi+alegerile+europarlamentare+%C3%AEn+pres%C4%83%E2%80%9D+&btnG=C%C4%83utare+Google&meta=&aq=f&oq=&fp=e6594cdf4002b6a6>, accessed in Nov., 10, 2009.

2.2. Media gender studies. The press coverage of the male and female candidates

In the lines to come, I will sum up the main research studies on the media coverage of the male and female candidates in electoral races, bringing together the theories, concepts and the most important conclusions on the subject.

Previous research shows that biased coverage of women seeking public office is not isolated, but systematic. Such studies found that the news media offer different portrayals of the female and male candidates, frequently in ways that may undermine the credibility of women who seek elective office (Bartels, 1993; Braden, 1996; Gidengil & Everitt, 2003; Kahn, 1994, 1996; Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991; Niven & Zilber, 2001).

The research conducted so far suggests that the media coverage of female candidates in electoral races differs from the coverage of their male counterparts, the differences being both regarding the quality and the quantity of coverage. Tuchman's (1978) seminal work on "symbolic annihilation" has fuelled research on the exclusion and trivialization of women in news. Symbolic annihilation is the absence of representation or underrepresentation of some group of people in the media (often based on their race, sex, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, etc.), understood in social sciences as a mean of maintaining social inequality. This term is usually applied to media criticism in the field of feminism, to describe the ways in which media promotes stereotypes and denies specific identities. Gaye Tuchman (1978) divided the concept of symbolic annihilation into three aspects: omission, trivialisation and condemnation.

Literature review shows that female candidates often receive less coverage than males, but more visibility on children and marital status, appearance, clothes, personality and family (Aday&Devitt, 2001; Banwart, Bystrom, & Robertson, 2003; Bystrom, 2006; Devitt, 2002; Fox, 1997; Heldman, Carroll, & Olson, 2005; Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991). Also, media coverage of women candidates stereotypes female candidates by emphasizing specific "feminine traits" (e.g. emotional, dependent), "feminine issues" (e.g. education, health care) and questioning their viability. According to Kahn (1994b), the gender stereotyped media coverage reduces a women candidate's perceived viability, creating an unfavourable electoral environment for female candidates.

Studies analysing the newspaper coverage of women gubernatorial and U.S. Senate candidates (Devitt, 1999; Kahn, 1992, 1994a, 1994b, 1996), as well as Elizabeth Dole's bid for Republican nomination for president in 1999 (Bystrom, 1999), show that women and men are treated differently by the media. In contrast to male candidates, the female candidates are less visible in campaign news, their electoral prospects are presented rather negatively, and

they are more often framed in terms of the horse-race and campaign strategy. Women running for political office often struggle to receive media coverage and legitimacy in the eyes of the media (Braden, 1996; Devitt, 1999; Kahn, 1992, 1994a, 1994b; Witt, Paget & Matthews, 1994). According to Braden (1996: 1), journalists “often ask women politicians questions they don’t ask men” and describe them “in ways and with words that emphasize women’s traditional roles and focus on their appearance and behaviour”.

When issues are a focus, women candidates are more often reported in the context of women’s issues, or “softer” social issues such as education or health. Research has also shown that such biases can have consequences for women candidates not only in their campaigns, but also at the polls (Bartels, 1993). Gendered coverage has a strong impact on the public evaluations about the candidates (Kahn, 1992, 1993, 1994).

Additional studies have examined the impact of strategy or horse-race coverage on female candidates. They have concluded that strategy coverage may be a barrier to women’s electoral success because it portrays their candidacies as less viable than does such coverage of men (Kahn, 1994; Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991). An illustrative example in this respect is Semetko and Boomgaarden’s (2007) work, in which was analyzed the media coverage of the Germany’s election campaign in 2005, emphasizing that Angela Merkel was depicted more critically than her counterpart, Gerhard Schröder, portrayed as a winner.

Jamieson (1995) also highlights that women are more likely than men to be subjected to negative gender distinctions, while men are depicted in gender-neutral terms. A negative gender distinction is a reference to one’s gender, described as a hindrance. When somebody is depicted in gender-neutral terms, the subject’s gender is irrelevant to how he or she is portrayed.

2.3. Viability in the coverage. Horse-race frame

An important aspect in the studies on gendered candidates coverage is the use of horse-race frames, in which the positions of candidates in public opinion polls and their viability are central (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993). The American literature (Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991) shows that female candidates are more often reported in horse-race framed news. Many authors stressed that this frame can be a barrier to the electoral success of the women candidates, as they are portrayed by media as less viable than men. With only a few exceptions (Smith, 1997), the most studies conducted on this topic conclude that women are depicted as not being viable to handle a political office (Bartels, 1993; Braden, 1996; Gidengil & Everitt, 2003; Kahn, 1994, 1996; Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991; Niven & Zilber, 2001).

To identify a horse-race frame, scholars usually analyze the media content looking for mentions about the results of public opinion polls and the campaign resources of the candidate. Also, researchers analyze the statements about the political actors as potential winners or losers of what is described as a competition, seeking for metaphors from the world of sports or war. Of great importance is, as well, the overall view of the candidate's viability, considered to be suitable, somewhat suitable or unsuitable to represent the citizens' interests. Even if there are a lot of articles analyzing the dominant frames in the media coverage of the political candidates, including horse-race frame, until now the study of the factors that influence the viability of the candidates has not been researched.

With a relatively recent history, the concept of "frame" became one of the key terms in the field of media studies. Most of the works based on agenda setting theory stress the frame effect, emphasizing that mass media not only indicate the priorities, but also the attributes.

Although in sociology and social psychology the term of "frame" has been used since the early 50's (Bateson, 1955), the concept was introduced in the field of media studies by Entman, in the article about "frame as fractured paradigm" (Entman, 1993). Consecrated in sociology by Goffman (1974) and assumed later in the field of media and communication sciences, the frames are defined as "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, presentation, selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize the discourse, whether verbal or visual" (Gitlin, 2003: 7).

3. Methodology

The research method I used in this article is the quantitative content analysis, which allowed me to answer at the research questions that guided this study. It has as purpose to analyze and compare the press coverage of the two most visible male and female candidates for a MEP seat in Brussels, as identified by the Media Monitoring Agency: Elena Băsescu and George Becali.

In order to analyze the media coverage of the two candidates, I monitored the Romanian press during the campaign for the European elections, from 8th of May to 7th of June 2009. The sample consists of 229 articles published in two daily news quality newspapers (*Evenimentul Zilei* and *Gândul*) and two tabloids (*Cancan* and *Libertatea*). I considered relevant for the analysis these media institutions due to their specific audience. National newspapers, with a large number of unique users, the four media sources present completely all the events that took place during the campaign for the European elections.

To select the sample, I searched on the online databases of the newspapers mentioned above the articles which included the next words: "Elena Basescu", "Elena Băseșcu", "EBA", "George Becali", "Gigi Becali" and "Becali". For content analyze the media news regarding the two candidates, I considered as counting unit the article, more specifically any article which mentions one of the two candidates.

For establishing the scheme of categories, I used an inductive perspective. This research instrument was conducted in two steps. In the first phase I examined the data and I developed a scheme of categories which respects the principles of exclusivity, completeness and classification. In this scheme I included all the relevant variables for answering to the research questions of the study. Some of the variables considered are the following: the source, the date when the article was published, the length of the article, the name of the author, journalist's gender, the name of the candidate portrayed in the article, the viability of the candidate, the campaign resources of the candidate, the mentions about the candidate's position in the election polls, the statements using language or metaphors from the world of sports or war, etc.

In the second phase the codebook was tested, by performing a content analysis on half of the articles included in the sample. Each article was coded, in order to obtain a better research instrument. In the last stage, there were made the last changes to the codebook.

Having in mind the theoretical framework presented before and the scientific context, I defined the following research hypotheses: H1 - *Elena Băseșcu, the independent candidate for the European Parliament, receives less visibility from the media than George Becali*; H2 - *Elena Băseșcu is depicted by the media as not being viable to handle the MEP seat, for which is running*; H3 - *The viability of Elena Băseșcu depends on the position in the election polls and the low financial resources*.

The research questions on which I guided my analysis are: Q1 - *What is the distribution of visibility per each candidate?*; Q2 - *Are there significant differences in the quantity and focus of newspaper coverage accorded to the female and male candidates?*; Q3 - *What is the distribution of visibility per each candidate, at the level of the analyzed media sources?*; Q4 - *How is the viability newspaper coverage accorded to Elena Băseșcu?*; Q5- *Which are the factors that influence the viability of the independent candidate, Elena Băseșcu?*

For analyzing and processing the data, I used SPSS. In the first part of the research, there were used frequencies and cross tabulations. The frequencies were used to investigate and compare the visibility of Elena Băseșcu to that of George Becali, while cross tabulations were used in order to analyze the viability of the candidates for the MEP seats. In the second part of the study, I run a linear regression to find out the factors that affect the viability of Elena Băseșcu.

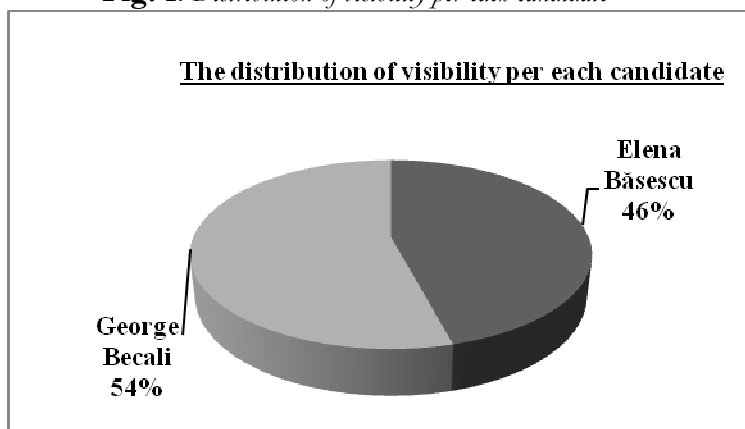
4. Results

4.1. The distribution of visibility per each candidate. Elena Băsescu's visibility vs. George Becali's visibility

Regarding the visibility of the independent candidate, Elena Băsescu, it comprises a value of 45.85% (N=105) from the total number of references. Less than a half of all articles belong to the female candidate, Elena Băsescu, discussing issues such as her electoral program or the individual attributes by which she's depicted.

Compared with Elena Băsescu, George Becali is more prominent in media. From the total number of stories included in the sample (229), George Becali cumulated a percentage of 54.15% (N=124). So, the difference in the quantity of newspaper coverage accorded to the female and male candidates is about eight percentage points the male candidate, George Becali, having a higher visibility.

Fig. 1: *Distribution of visibility per each candidate*



Note: Numbers represent the percentages for the visibility of each candidate, calculated from the total number of references about the two political figures.

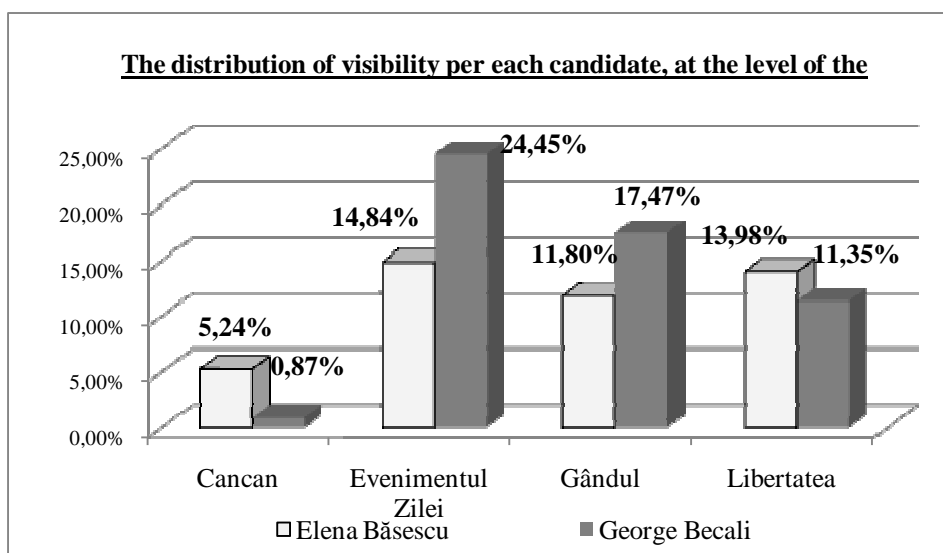
4.2. The distribution of visibility per each candidate, at the level of the analyzed media sources

The newspaper with the highest number of references for Elena Băsescu is *Evenimentul Zilei*, that comprises a value of 14.84% (N=34) from the total number of references. The second one is the tabloid *Libertatea*, which indicates a percentage of 13.98% (N=32). The difference between these two media sources is only about one percentage point, which suggests that Elena Băsescu has almost the same visibility in both of these newspapers. *Gândul*

highlights a percentage of 11.80% (N=27), while *Cancan* has the lowest visibility 5.24% (N=12) from the total number of references belong to *Cancan*, which seems to be less interested in Elena Băsescu.

Regarding the media coverage of the male candidate, George Becali, he is the most prominent in *Evenimentul Zilei*. The percentages reveal that the interest of this media source on George Becali is about 25.45% (N=56) percentage points. Compared with *Evenimentul Zilei*, the daily newspapers *Gândul* and *Libertatea* are less interested in George Becali. They have smaller percentages, of 17.47% (N=40) and 11.35% (N=26). Becali has zero visibility in *Cancan*; there were only two references in this newspaper, accumulating a percentage of 0.87% (N=2).

Fig. 2: *The visibility of the candidates in mass media*



Note: Numbers represent the percentages for the visibility of each candidate at the level of media sources. They are calculated from the total number of references about the two political figure.

4.3. The viability newspaper coverage accorded to Elena Băsescu

Regarding her viability for a MEP office, Elena Băsescu was depicted by the four media sources as inappropriate. A percentage of 77.5% (N=31) from the total number of articles about Elena Băsescu underlines that she is unable to represent the interests of the Romanian citizens in Brussels. The percentage of this indicator is the highest one, suggesting that media show a negative attitude toward the political competences of Elena Băsescu. 22.58% (N=7) from the total number of references emphasizes that the female candidate is

suitable, while a percentage of 6.45% (N=2) suggests that Elena Bănescu is somewhat suitable to become Member of the European Parliament.

4.4. The factors that influence the viability of the independent candidate, Elena Bănescu

To analyze the factors that influence the viability of Elena Bănescu, I run a linear regression model in which I considered as dependent variable the "viability" (VIABIL). Like predictors, I employed six independent variables: "low campaign resources" (LOW), "lack of professionalism in the energy policy" (BAD_ENER), "data about the position of the candidate in the election polls" (POLL_MENT), "language and metaphors from the world of sports or war" (WARS_MENT), "statements according to which politics is a male domain" (MALE_DOM) and "emotive" (EMOTIV). After running the linear regression model, I noticed that there is no outlier at the level of the partial regression plots.

The regression model run for Elena Bănescu highlights that the independent variable with the greatest influence on her viability is "data about the position of the candidate in the election polls" (POLL_MENT). The value of the standardized regression coefficient for this independent variable is the highest one (beta = [-0.280]). Taking into account the level of significance (sig. ≤ 0.05), it results that this factor, "data about the position of the candidate in the election polls" (POLL_MENT), brings a considerable contribution to the viability of Elena Bănescu. The relationship between the independent variable and the viability of Elena Bănescu is also significant, being representative not only at the sample's level, but at the level of all media sources.

If I classify the independent variables on the criteria of their influence on the dependent variable (VIABIL), comparing the values of the standardized regression coefficient, the order will be the following: "data about the position of the candidate in the election polls" (POLL_MENT, beta = [-0.280]), "statements according to which politics is a male domain" (MALE_DOM, beta = [-0.182]), "low campaign resources" (LOW, beta = [-0.155]), "language and metaphors from the world of sports or war" (WARS_MENT, beta = [-0.140]) and "lack of professionalism in the energy policy" (BAD_ENER, beta = [-0.040]).

In the case of the variable "data about the position of the candidate in the election polls" (POLL_MENT), both beta and B are negative. This means that Elena Bănescu's viability decreases with the value of the non-standardized regression coefficient (B = [-1,027]) when the independent variable increases by one unit. For the variable "statements according to which politics is a male domain" (MALE_DOM), beta and B are also negative. This underlines that Elena Bănescu's viability decreases if there, in the media news, is mentioned

that politics is a domain specific to men. The more references on this theme, the better Elena Basescu's viability will decrease (with 1055, the value of B).

Regarding the variable "low campaign resources" (LOW), beta is negative. This means that the viability of Elena Basescu decreases with the value of B (1.259) if the story refers to the low campaign budget. With respect to the variable "contains language and metaphors from the world of sports or war" (WARS_MENT), Elena Basescu's viability decreases by 0.593 (B) when the independent variable increases by one unit.

Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1 (Constant)	1.321	.159		8.297	.000		
LOW	-1.259	.796	-.155	-1.581	.117	.913	1.096
BAD_ENER	-.279	.692	-.040	-.404	.687	.916	1.092
WARS_MENT	-.593	.415	-.140	-1.429	.156	.922	1.085
POLL_MENT	-1.027	.348	-.280	-2.949	.004	.976	1.024
MALE_DOM	-1.055	.553	-.182	-1.908	.059	.974	1.027
EMOTIV	.093	.418	.022	.222	.825	.908	1.102

a. Dependent Variable: VIABIL

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Regarding the first hypothesis - *Elena Basescu, the independent candidate for the European Parliament, receives less visibility from the media than George Becali*, the results of this research validate it. The content analysis reveals that Elena Basescu has a lower visibility than George Becali with about seven percentage points.

The present study assumes the same perspective emphasized by the previous research conducted by Aday&Devitt (2001), Bystrom (2006), and stresses that there are gender differences regarding the media coverage of the female and male candidates. Elena Basescu's visibility is lower than that of George Becali. More than that, Gaye Tuchman's concept of "symbolic annihilation" is supported by the results of this research. We cannot talk about a lack of media representation for Elena Basescu, but the difference in terms of prominence between the two male and female candidates is about seven percentage points. However, for some cohesive conclusions on the issue of

symbolic annihilation, this research has to be developed at the level of all candidates implied in the campaign for the European elections.

With respect to the second research hypothesis - *Elena Băsescu is depicted by the media as not being viable to handle the MEP seat, for which is running*, it is also validated. The results of the study reveal that Elena Băsescu is depicted by media as inappropriate for the MEP office, as happens with most of the female candidates according to the previous studies on the theme.

The last hypothesis - *The viability of Elena Băsescu depends on the position in the election polls and the low financial resources*, was as well validated. The findings of this research reveal that the viability of Elena Basescu mostly depends on the assertions regarding the position of the candidate in the election polls and the low campaign budget.

All in all, even if not a complex research, this study offers an idea on the way in which are portrayed by media the male and female candidates for a MEP seat during the campaign for the European elections. Also, the study can be considered a call for the media gender studies on the Romanian candidates for a MEP office and it should be developed, using a complex sample, for more comprehensive conclusions.

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